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War of the Woods - Sprockids in high gear

By Jennifer Maloney (Rob Newell pic)

May 26 2005

Doug Detwiller nervously looked around at the young riders donning tie-dyed shirts and cut-off shorts positioned on their hard-tailed bikes to face the gravel road.

It was the first Test of Metal race, casually strung together by bike entrepreneur Paul Brodie, who had scouted the Roberts Creek location for its slightly wider-than-average road.

Being an older cyclist Detwiller was petrified of what lay ahead, but as the wheels on his beater bike gained momentum, the elementary school teacher was encouraged by the youthful competitors who cheered him on.

"People were more concerned that everyone finished than about who won. I thought there's something really magical about this," Detwiller recalls in a telephone interview from his home in Gibsons, B.C. "I thought, I could use this with my students." The teacher's original idea was to incorporate mountain biking into a self-esteem and anger management program for kids that weren't connecting with school.

"A lot of kids, we put them in a classroom and ask them to sit in a chair and learn that way, but that's not how they learn," he explains. "I use [mountain biking] as a way of teaching that hidden curriculum." Over the years Detwiller has taken mountain biking into the classroom, using it to teach math, science and social studies.

Rather than learning rates and ratios through a text book, Detwiller teaches his students to calculate the correct combination of gears on mountain bikes to make them go uphill or turn with more ease. For measurements, kids are given a bike frame and asked to survey its components before drawing it to scale, using their own figures. In social studies they

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research the invention of the wheel or how the idea of gears originated.

“Then I say let’s go out and do it. Let’s ride and put it to the test. It’s kept me in education and enabled me to connect with a lot of kids,” Detwiller said.

“If you can take a kid and turn their life around, I don’t think there’s any greater high than that.”

The programs Detwiller invented on the Sunshine Coast became the genesis of the Sprockids Club, a program he started in 1990 to get kids on bikes so they could develop skills, values and strategies that would bring success into other areas of their lives.

“As a teacher I truly feel that teaching kids is about taking calculated risks and learning from their mistakes,” he said. “Learning outside of the box and having empathy for others is the most important thing in education. Adults who succeed take those chances.

“I just found mountain biking was an amazing way of connecting with those kids.”

Since the launch of Sprockids, the community program has spread to 17 countries and has become the official program for the introduction to cycling in Canada.

Peter Lauritzen, 18, joined Sprockids in Grade 7 and is one of the top riders at Argyle secondary school, training three to four times a week for high school races.

“I like being able to be free,” he says in a telephone interview. “It’s all about having fun. I love racing, but it’s just the atmosphere, having fun with your buddies and riding the trails, pushing yourself to go as hard as you can and learning.”

Twice Lauritzen has been invited to the National Mountain Bike Camp where pro riders like Lesley Tomlinson, Alison Sydor and Roland Green teach the province’s most accomplished up-and-comers how to train and eat properly.

“Once you get started you can’t stop,” Lauritzen insists. “Even on a rainy day you want to go out and do a trail. If I didn’t have biking I would probably be one of those kids playing video games. It’s just been good.”

Last summer Lauritzen got a job at Pedal Heads in Lynn Valley, teaching kids between the ages of six and 12 to ride. He received letters of gratitude from parents who saw improvement in their children’s fitness.

Although Detwiller never envisioned Sprockids to have such wide-ranging effect, he believes its results are having a positive influence on society.

“I believe in our society we have to redefine the role

of sports,” he explains. “Child diabetes and obesity have never been so high. So many young people think if they’re not a sports star then sports aren’t for them.

“Sports are something we should all do; it needs to be a part of our daily lives and it’s got to be fun.” While Detwiller is known as the inventor of the international program, he says it’s the youth that are the driving force behind it. In fact, Detwiller will be speaking at the North Shore Mountain Bike Conference later this month on this very matter. “Youth are the greatest advocate for our sport,” he says. “We’re there to help them. A big part of it is giving back.”

(For more information about the North Shore Mountain Bike Festival and Conference visit www.shorebikefest.com)

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